

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SSM-03 CIAE-00
PM-05 H-01 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01
SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11 ACDA-12 OMB-01 /105 W
-----048750 251431Z /64

P R 251236Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7741
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY PARIS
USLO RIYADH
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
USINT BAGHDAD
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
SECDEF WASHDC
DIA WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 BEIRUT 2334

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PERP, PINT, LE, SY, IS, PLO
SUBJECT: THE MAKINGS OF A QUAGMIRE: SYRIA AND LEBANON

REF: DAMASCUS 2212

1. SUMMARY: EMBASSY DAMASCUS' SUPERB ANALYSIS OF
SYRIAN DILEMMA IN LEBANON LARGELY CONCORDS WITH PERCEPTIONS
OF THE PROBLEM HERE IN BEIRUT. WE WOULD NOTE SOME MAJOR AND
MINOR DIFFERENCES, MOST SIGNIFICANTLY APPARENT SYRIAN
ASSUMPTION THAT SARKIS IS THE MAN TO DEAL WITH THE CHAMOUN

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PROBLEM. WE DOUBT THERE IS A SYRIAN MILITARY SOLUTION TO
THE LEBANESE FRONT PROBLEM. WHILE WE DO NOT RULE OUT SYRIAN
INTEREST DURING AYN AR-RUMMANAH/SHIYAH INCIDENTS IN
TEACHING THE FRONT A LESSON IN AFTERMATH OF FAYYADIYAH
INCIDENTS, THE EVIDENCE TO DATE SUGGESTS THAT THERE WAS
AMPLE JUSTIFICATION FOR THE SYRIAN REACTION IN TERMS OF
SYRIA'S PEACEKEEPING ROLE AND LEBANESE FRONT PROVOCATIONS.

2. WE SHARE EMBASSY DAMASCUS' HOPE THAT THE SYRIANS WILL CONSIDER MOVING TO THE LITANI AFTER THE ISRAELIS HAVE WITHDRAWN FROM SOUTH LEBANON; THIS COULD BE A FIRST STEP TOWARDS BRINGING THE PALESTINIANS IN LEBANON UNDER CONTROL. SYRIANS MAY HAVE EXCESSIVE CONFEDENCE IN ABILITY OF SARKIS TO IMPLEMENT EFFECTIVE SECURITY PLAN IF AND WHEN THE SOUTH IS STABILIZED. IN ANY EVENT, COMPOSITION OF NEW LEBANESE CABINET SHOULD THROW CONSIDERABLE LIGHT ON ABILITY OF LEBANESE GOVERNMENT TO ARREST DRIFT TOWARDS GREATER INSTABILITY HERE -- WHICH WOULD BE A QUAGMIRE THE SYRIANS COULD HARDLY AVOID -- AND TO CREATE NEW CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH MIGHT PERMIT A THINNING OUT OF SYRIAN INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON. END SUMMARY.

3. SARKIS MAY BE PART OF THE CHAMOUN PROBLEM. WE SHARE SYRIAN FOREIGN MINISTER KHADDAM'S COMMENT (REFTEL) PARA 9 THAT "THE NUMBER ONE PROBLEM TODAY IN LEBANON IS CHAMOUN HIMSELF" IN THE PURELY POLITICAL SENSE, ALTHOUGH BASHIR GEMAYEL IS A GREATER DIRECT PHYSICAL MENACE ON THE STREETS. PROBLEM IS NOT SO MUCH THE POLITICAL STRENGTH WHICH CHAMOUN ENJOYS AS IT IS THE INABILITY AND/OR UNWILLINGNESS OF THE SARKIS GOVERNMENT TO DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH CHAMOUN'S SUPERB TACTICAL MASTERY OF THE POLITICAL BATTLEFIELD IN BEIRUT. CHAMOUN KNOWS HOW TO USE THE MEDIA TO SET THE TONE OF MARONITE THINKING IN SECRET

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LEBANON GENERALLY, WHEREAS THE SARKIS GOVERNMENT HAS YET TO DISCOVER THAT THERE IS A DAILY PRESS IN BEIRUT. CHAMOUN ALSO EXERCISES A CERTAIN POWER OF INTIMIDATION OVER BOTH SARKIS AND BOUTROS, AND KNOWS HOW TO USE THE MILITIAS CONTROLLED BY BASHIR GEMAYEL AND HIS SON DANY AS A THREAT, ALTHOUGH HIS DIRECT INFLUENCE ON BASHIR IS LIMITED.

4. SARKIS HAS FAILED TO CAPITALIZE ON THE DIVERGENCIES WITHIN THE LEBANESE FRONT TO COMBAT CHAMOUN: WE SUSPECT THAT, GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY, BOTH PIERRE GEMAYEL AND SULEIMAN FRANGIEH COULD BE PREVAILED UPON TO BREAK WITH CHAMOUN, IF ONLY THE GOVERNMENT ITSELF WOULD PROVIDE A SUITABLE ALTERNATIVE POLITICAL COVER. DESIGNATION OF NEW CABINET PROVIDES EXCELLENT OPPORTUNITY FOR SARKIS TO PUSH CHAMOUN OUT INTO RIGHT FIELD, IF HE HAS THE COURAGE AND SKILL TO DO IT.

5. THEREAFTER, HE HAS CONSIDERABLE INSTRUMENTS OF POWER TO USE AGAINST CHAMOUN, NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH IS THE SYRIAN ADF, IF HE WILL TAKE THE RISK. OUR CONFIDENCE THAT HE HAS THE NECESSARY AUDACITY HAS

BEEN STEADILY ERRODED IN RECENT MONTHS.

6. THE LEBANES RIGHT. EMBASSY DAMASCUS IS QUITE CORRECT IN POINTING OUT THAT THE LEBANESE RIGHT IS INCREASINGLY SEEKING A SHOWDOWN WITH THE PALESTINIANS AND THREATENING PARTITION IF THE MOSLEMS DO NOT SUPPORT THEM (PARA 8). IN THE MARONITE VIEW, THE ISRAELIS DID NOT STRIKE A MEANINGFUL BLOW AGAINST THE PALESTINIANS, BUT ONLY MOVED THE PROBLEM 20 KILOMETERS CLOSER TO BEIRUT. EVEN BASHIR GEMAYEL, THE MOST BOMBASTIC PROPONENT OF A MILITARY SOLUTION, HAS LEARNED TO BE DISTRUSTFUL OF HIS ISRAELI ALLY.

7. IT WOULD HAVE MADE SENSE FOR THE MARONITES TO HAVE
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WORKED TO STRENGTHEN SARKIS TO THIS END (AS PARA 8 SEEMS TO ASSUME). SUCH IS THE SELF-DESTRUCTIVE PARANOIA OF THE RIGHT WING OF THE LEBANES FRONT AND THE PERSONAL POLITICAL AMBITIONS OF CAMILLE CHAMOUN (IN THE POLITICAL SALON) AND OF BASHIR GEMAYEL (IN THE STREET), HOWEVER, THAT IN FACT THEY HAVE BEEN THE PRINCIPAL OBSTACLES TO SARKIS IN REBUILDING THE INSTITUTIONS OF THE STATE.

8. WE DO NOT SEE A MILITARY SOLUTION, SYRIAN OR OTHERWISE, TO THE LEBANESE FRONT PROBLEM. IF, IN A CRISIS SITUATION, ASSAD WERE TO GO FOR A "QUICK ROUT OF THE MILITIAS" (PARA 11), HE MIGHT NOT ACHIEVE IT. THE SYRIAN ARMY IS NOT TRAINED OR ORGANIZED FOR URBAN GUERILLA FIGHTING; THE MILITIAS ARE WELL-EQUIPPED WITH ANTI-TANK WEAPONS. THE SYRIANS CAN DESTROY CHRISTIAN BEIRUT BUT THEY MAY NOT BE ABLE TO DESTROY THE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS.

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9. DISSECTING AYN AR-RUMMANAH/SHIYAH. THE PLO, INCLUDING THE REJECTIONISTS, CERTAINLY DID AVOID PROVOKING THE ADF DURING THE AYN AR-RUMMANAH/SHIYAH FIGHTING (PARA 5). IT IS PRECISELY THE ABSENCE OF A SYRIAN-PALESTINIAN CLASH THERE THAT HAS BEEN GRIST FOR THE LEBANESE FRONT PROPAGANDA MILL. ALTHOUGH THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT THE PALESTINIANS WERE INVOLVED DIRECTLY IN THE INITIAL FIGHTING (BETWEEN LEBANESE LEFTISTS AND CHRISTIANS), THERE IS SOME SLIGHT EVIDENCE THAT THEY DID PROVIDE LOGISTIC ASSISTANCE TO THE LEFTISTS. MORE POLITICALLY OPERATIVE, HOWEVER, MANY MARONITES HAVE
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CHOSEN TO INTERPRET THE ABSENCE OF SYRIAN-PALESTINIAN FIGHTING AS INDICATIVE OF AN OBJECTIVE ALLIANCE AGAINST THEMSELVES. THE MARONITE PARANOIA MAY BE WITHOUT BASIS IN FACT, BUT IT CONSTITUTES A REAL POLITICAL PROBLEM FOR SYRIAN AS WELL AS FOR THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT.

10. IT IS PLAUSIBLE THAT THE SYRIANS DELIBERATELY WERE HEAVY-HANDED AT AYN AR-RUMMANAH IN ORDER TO TEACH THE RIGHTIST MILITIAS A LESSON (PARA 10), AND THERE IS SOME EVIDENCE THAT IT HAS HAD THIS EFFECT, EVEN THAT SOME BHRISTIANS ARE BLAMING PIERRE AND BASHIR GEMAYEL FOR THE FIASCO. HOWEVER, THE SYRIANS ARE IN A NO-WIN SITUATION: IF THEY STRIKE HARSHLY, THEY INCUR THE GENERALIZED CHARGE OF BRUTALITY; IF THEY ARE RESTRAINED, THE MILITIAS CLAIM A MILITARY VICTORY. THE SYRIANS HAVE

NOT YET DEVELOPED A TAILORED RESPONSE TO MILITIA PROVOCATIONS, AND IT SEEMS INCREASINGLY LIKELY THAT THEY WILL BE ABLE TO DO SO. THERE REMAINS THE SHOTGUN APPROACH, WHICH IS ULTIMATELY SELF-DEFEATING.

11. DEALING WITH THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM IN LEBANON. IF, AS KHADDAM HAS HINTED, THE SYRIANS DO MOVE DOWN TO THE LITANI AFTER AN ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL (ASSUMING THE ISRAELIS DO WITHDRAW FROM ALL OF SOUTH LEBANON), THE WAY MIGHT BE OPENED FOR THE SYRIANS TO DO WHAT THEY WERE UNWILLING TO DO FROM THE TIME OF THEIR OCCUPATION OF LEBANON'S CITIES IN NOVEMBER 1976 UNTIL THE BIRTH OF THE SADAT INITIATIVE IN DECEMBER 1977, AND HAVE BEEN UNABLE -- FOR REGIONAL POLITICAL REASONS -- TO DO EVER SINCE; THAT IS, CONTROL THE PALESTINIANS IN LEBANON. AS LONG AS THE SADAT INITIATIVE NEITHER SUCCEEDS NOR PROVES TO BE A DISMAL FAILURE, HOWEVER WE DO NOT SEE THAT SYRIAN POLITICAL INTERESTS WOULD PERMIT MILITARY ACTION
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AGAINST PALESTINIAN ROUTES OF COMMUNICATION AND BASES IN LEBANON.

12. SHTAURA REVISITED. "MODIFIED" SHTAURA AGREEMENT IS BEING MENTIONED OCCASIONALLY IN BEIRUT NOW, BUT WE WOULD NOT EXPECT IT TO BE CONSIDERED SERIOUSLY AGAIN UNTIL ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL FROM THE SOUTH IS COMPLETED, AND ROLE OF UNIFIL VIS-A-VIS THE PALESTINIANS EMERGES MORE CLEARLY. IF THE MARONITES CAN THEN BE HELD AT BAY, THE SARKIS GOVERNMENT MIGHT THEN MAKE A NEW TRY AT A GENERAL POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING WITH THE PALESTINIANS. SYRIA'S ROLE IN ENCOURAGING THE PALESTINIANS TO RESPECT THE LEGITIMACY OF SARKIS' LEADERSHIP (PARA 6) WOULD BECOME VITALLY IMPORTANT. IT WILL NOT, HOWEVER, BE SUFFICIENT, GIVEN THE WEAKNESS OF THE LEBANESE ARMY AND POLICE, UNLESS THE SYRIAN ARE ALSO PREPARED TO LEND A DIRECT HELPING HAND IN BOTTLING UP THE PALESTINIANS. WE SHARE EMBASSY DAMASCUS' LACK OF OPTIMISM (PARA 7) THAT THE SYRIANS ARE GOING EVEN TO MOVE DOWN TO THE LITANI ANYTIME SOME. IN SUM, REAL PROGRESS ON LEBANON'S PALESTINIAN PROBLEM IS NOT IN THE CARDS FOR THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE.

13. SARKIS AND SECURITY IN LEBANON. KHADDAM'S VAGUENESS ON SYRIAN HELP TO EFFECT "PLAN WHICH SARKIS HAD ALREADY DEVELOPED TO ENHANCE SECURITY" IS UNDERSTANDABLE. AT THIS POINT, WE SUSPECT THAT SARKIS' PLAN ITSELF IS QUITE VAGUE. PERHAPS A NEW GOVERNMENT WILL HELP, BUT WE WILL BELIEVE LEBANESE PLANS TO ESTABLISH SECURITY WITH LEBANESE MEANS IN LEBANON ONLY WHEN WE SEE THEM BEING IMPLEMENTED, NOT BEFORE.

14. GENERAL COMMENT: WE SHARE THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT'S
HOPE THAT THINGS WILL GET BETTER IN LEBANON; WE SHARE
EMBASSY DAMASCUS' RECOGNITION OF MANY OF THE PROBLEMS
WE WORRY, HOWEVER, THAT THE DEMONSTRATED LEBANESE
PROPENSITY FOR MAKING THINGS WORSE, THE FUNDAMENTAL
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INTRACTABILITY OF LEBANON'S INTERNAL POLITICAL
PROBLEMS AND THE WEAKNESS OF THE SARKIS REGIME MAY MAKE
THE BEST OF SYRIAN INTENTIONS AND DETERMINATION MEANING-
LESS. WE AGREE THAT PRESIDENT ASSAD AT THIS POINT HAS LITTLE
CHOICE BUT TO WAIT, AND HOPE FOR A BREAK IN THE
SITUATION.
PARKER

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: FOREIGN RELATIONS, TROOP DEPLOYMENT, INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 25 apr 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978BEIRUT02334
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780176-0628
Format: TEL
From: BEIRUT
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780422/aaaaarrh.tel
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Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
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Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 6
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 78 DAMASCUS 2212
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 28 jun 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2864253
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: THE MAKINGS OF A QUAGMIRE: SYRIA AND LEBANON
TAGS: PEPR, PINT, LE, SY, IS, PLO
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odhc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/801849a8-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014